Lowell School District’s energy project inspires local pride

People should value K-12 schools as an integral part of their communities, says Lowell School District Superintendent Walter L. Hanline, Ed.D. Last year, the Oregon Department of Energy’s Small-scale Energy Loan Program worked with the school district on a complete energy efficiency overhaul. The result: the district now uses a third less energy, despite the increased use of facility space.

“Before the upgrades, it would have cost local taxpayers here $1000 per year over the next 20 to 30 years if we replaced the schools,” said Dr. Hanline. “Rather than that, we worked with SELP on energy installations that offered our schools a new look and feel, and provided us a chance to use unusable facility space,” Superintendent Hanline added.

After 30 years of dealing with deteriorating schools, the district modernized boiler controls, insulated walls, and replaced windows and lighting in the schools. Dr. Hanline said the ambitious project took only three months to complete, half the time it usually takes for a project this size.

“Our students had to succumb to an unconducive environment that was so bad they did not want to come to school,” said the superintendent. “The window seals were rotting away and the heating and cooling temperature inside the schools weren’t working properly, which affected how engaged students were.”

Dr. Hanline referred to substantial research done on how student motivation and academics can wane...
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depending on the comfort level of the school. Improving student experiences and learning environments can improve student performance. Within the Lowell School District, Superintendent Hanline said student scores are up because kids feel more connected. He shares this sentiment with other school districts that have used ODOE’s energy loans for energy installations and upgrades.

When the school doors opened after the renovations, Dr. Hanline and the Board knew their investment had paid off. Right away they noticed a total shift in attitudes and a new cultural mindset both inside and out. The investment brought back community pride.

“A student representative on our board says they feel like they are in a brand new school,” said Dr. Hanline. “They look forward to coming to school now.”

Without the support of SELP, the school district would not have had the funding to do the work. Superintendent Hanline also noted that working with the state energy loan program, rather than private sources, comes with greater value and support. The superintendent also spoke about the graciousness of staff, their expertise and ideas on how to make things happen.

John Hobbs, SELP loan officer said, “I’m pleased that the improvements to the school have had such a positive effect on students and the community. It was superintendent Hanline and the district leadership’s vision that made this project successful.”

Dr. Hanline said the district receives an enormous amount of community support. Schools in smaller cities, such as Lowell, see their schools as community centers, a focal point of their town.

Before energy upgrades students and administration were subjected to issues such as rotting window seals and windows that weren’t favorable to summer and winter conditions.

“Taxpayers don’t want to invest in schools that look like dumps,” said Superintendent Hanline. “Schools are really noticeable here and you can definitely see the difference in how Lowell residents embrace and see our upgraded school facilities.”

Dedicated to educational achievement and the success of every student, the Lowell School District is located in the city of Lowell in Lane County and includes Lundy Elementary and Lowell High School.

About the ODOE Energy Loan Program

The purpose of the Small-scale Energy Loan Program is to promote energy conservation and renewable energy resource development. The program offers low-interest loans for energy projects. For additional information about SELP, visit ODOE at Oregon.gov/ENERGY/LOANS/index.shtml.